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ABSTRACT

Satire appears to be one of the least attractive forms of humorous literature because many readers feel it encompasses negative and ill-mannered comic devices. By virtue of the fact that satire is not considered polite literature, it rarely makes its way into the planned literary curricula until students enter high school English courses. In this light, a study was conducted to examine the responses of students in grades four and seven to satire as reflected in selected contemporary picture books in which meaning was dependent upon both text and illustrations. Each group heard the literary selections read aloud and then completed questionnaires. Each subject was then given a set of oral preference/rejection questions pertaining to all the literary selections. The results showed that (1) all students expressed an enjoyment of satire as a type of humorous literature; (2) students did not respond to the major themes within the selections and did not associate them with their own lives; (3) students were capable of responding in a critical rather than a merely literate manner and they gleaned a great deal of information from aspects revealed within the artwork of the books; and (4) students were capable of recognizing the associational characteristics of stereotyping, superiority, moralizing, distortion, scorn, and exaggeration, but did not comprehend the associational characteristics of sarcasm, ridicule, social criticism, condemnation, contempt, or derision. (HOD)

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RESPONSES OF FOURTH AND SEVENTH GRADE STUDENTS TO SATIRE AS REFLECTED IN SELECTED CONTEMPORARY PICTURE BOOKS

By

Shelley G. McNamara

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Introduction

Historically speaking, satire has always been considered a controversial form of literature. The term satire has created controversy simply due to the fact that it defies precise definition. In contemporary usage, the term is used to designate several common properties which may be associated with a literary work, yet there are no properties which are common to all that is labeled as satire. Robert Elliott, noted writer and critic of satirical literature, has considered the matter as follows:

> This is not a factual question to be settled by examining the work for the necessary and sufficient properties which would automatically entitle it to the name satire; it is a decision question: are the resemblances of this work to various kinds of satire sufficient so that we are warranted in including it in the category?[1]

When we speak of satire today, we usually have in mind a work imbued with the satiric spirit. And that spirit reveals itself through any number of literary and rhetorical devices. The definition of such literature is elusive because the term denotes a tone as well as a form. Therefore:

> . . . no strict definition can encompass the complexity of a word which signifies, on one hand, a kind of literature, and on the other, a spirit or tone which expresses itself in many literary genres.[2]

Those literary devices associated with the satiric form contribute greatly to the controversial nature of this type of humorous literature. Satire appears to be one of the least attractive forms of humorous literature.

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[1]Robert C. Elliott, "The Definition of Satire: a Note on Method," Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 23.

[2]Ibid., p. 19.

by the very fact that so many readers feel that it encompasses the negative and ill-mannered of comic devices. Writers of this type and tone of literature utilize sarcasm, mockery, ridicule, attack, and other means of overt social criticism in order to bring their concerns to the attention of their audiences. There are many, then, who have found satire to be a controversial body of literature because it sacrifices the hearty and wholesome aspects of the comic spirit in order to place the ignoble and perverse in full view. Yet, without such disparagement, there can be no satire. Much of the irritation which is associated with satire probably is a result of the fact that satire is a form of humor which points directly at the incongruities of human beings. Inanimate objects and innocent animals have no place in the comic situations of satire. Satire is humor which can "be applied only to human beings, and only in situations for which they can be assumed responsible."[3] It would seem, then, that satire arouses indignation among many readers because it does not attempt to soften the anger or malicious intent of the satirist. It has been theorized that those readers with whom satiric literature is popular are those people who apply the sentiments to their neighbors rather than themselves, thus avoiding having to accept any personal moral responsibility for the social situation.[4] These readers enjoy the pleasures of superiority and the fact that "nobody really expects (them) to do anything about it (the injustice), and that (they) have no real intention of ever doing anything about it."[5]

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[3]Louis I. Bredvold, "A Note in Defense of Satire," ELH: a Journal of English Literary History 7 (December 1940), p. 259.

[4]Ibid., p. 257.

[5]Leonard Feinberg, "The Nature of Satire," Introduction to Satire (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1967), p. 7.

By virtue of the fact that satire is not considered to be polite literature, it rarely makes its way into the planned literary curricula until students enter high school English courses. It would appear that the major themes about which satirists choose to write constitute the reason for such omission. The proverbial existence, within our society, of the double standard of pretending to support one standard and yet, in reality, practicing another contributes the topics for the social criticism for the pens of the writers of satire. These topics tend to attack the hypocrisy surrounding established institutions of mainstreamed society such as government, organized religions, politics, marriage, family, and educational institutions. There are many adults who would deny young readers the opportunity to read statements of criticism of the very institutions which public school educational systems are supporting as right and just to children during their elementary and middle school years of instruction. Such themes of blatant criticism are seen as controversial at best and resultantly avoided when selections of literature are chosen.

Consequently, many of our children are not being given the opportunity to critically assess the themes that many satirists see as hypocritical. They are not offered literature which questions the inequities or wrong doings of contemporary society. They are not being encouraged to share personal responses to the issues and controversial topics which these authors are revealing. Yet, since one of the functions of the literary experience is to allow each reader the satisfaction of becoming a critical thinking member of society at large, it is only natural that children begin to experience such encounters within the setting of the language arts or English classroom.

In order to offer children the tools which will allow them to experience literature and life with a heightened awareness, to go beyond the literal interpretation of a text, and to associate the work of literature with their own lives, we must begin to offer works of satire early in the educational experience. Clearly, such exposure will have to begin in the elementary grades and be continued all the way through high school. The ability to think, read, and respond critically can only develop with much practice and experimentation.

> Boys and girls who can recognize the incongruities and absurdities in life and be amused at them should become adults who can meet unexpected situations sanely and philosophically.[6]

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[6]Ruth E. Wells, "A Study of Tastes in Humorous Literature Among Pupils of Junior and Senior High Schools," The Journal of Educational Research 28 (1934), p. 90.

Statement of Research Questions

In this study this researcher examined the following questions and sub-questions:

1. What are the responses of students toward contemporary satire as a genre of literature?

   Sub-question (a): What is the general attitude of students toward contemporary satire as a genre of literature?

   Sub-question (b): In what ways do students apparently respond to contemporary works of satire as works of humorous literature?

   Sub-question (c): To what extent do students respond to contemporary works of satire as works of humorous literature?

2. To what extent are students capable of recognizing specific associational characteristics of satire as a genre of literature?

3. To what extent do the responses of female students differ from the responses of male students when they are responding to contemporary selections of satire?

4. To what extent do the responses of seventh grade students differ from the responses of fourth grade students when they are responding to selection of contemporary satire?

5. To what extent do the responses of students toward contemporary satire change after experiencing several selections over a period of five consecutive weeks?

Selection of Books

Specific literary selctions were chosen according to the following guidelines:

(1) Since it was the intention of this study to measure response to contemporary works of fiction, those books selected had to meet the requirement of being published and copyrighted within the 1970's.

(2) Since it was the intention of this study to measure response to picture books, it was necessary to selct from that special form of an illustrated book wherein there exists a fusion of text and illustration, books wherein the message or meaning presented is dependent upon both text and artwork.

(3) Since it was the intention of this study to measure response to satire, associational characteristics of satire were accumulated by this researcher as she read the professional literature pertaining to humorous literature and the genre of satire specifically. Those literary techniques used alone or in some combination of one or more were compiled into a checklist entitled "Some Associational Characteristics of Satire." This checklist was then used to identify works of satire from the general category of humorous fiction.

Once titles of contemporary pictures books were discovered, this researcher accepted or rejected them as satire based on the inclusion or exclusion of the literary devices of satire. After a master list of five selections of satire was compiled for possible use in the study, four other authorities within the field of literature were consulted in order to ascertain whether or not there was agreement with the researcher that all of the selections were in fact works of satire.

After the selections were rated, this researcher compared the responses of the raters with her own responses with respect to each characteristic of satire for all three books. The intention was to find out what percentage of agreement existed between the responses of the raters and the responses of the investigator.

When considering all forty-two possible traits within the three works, this researcher found agreement to exist for thirty-five traits or for eighty-three percent total agreement between her itemizations of the associational characteristics of satire and the itemizations of four raters.

Selected Works of Satire--Annotated Bibliography

de Paola, Tomie. The Quicksand Book. New York: Holiday House, 1977.
This picture book ridicules the impertinence and snobism often a major aspect of intellectualism. It is a painstakingly developed, humorous cliff-hanger which foreshadows the surprise ending of having to eat one's own words. Vibrantly colored cartoon drawings reveal smugness, pomposity, and ostentatiousness within the guise of an informational book.

Foreman, Michael. War and Peas. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1974.
This picture book is an expose about global issues of famine, food waste, greed and war. It is a fantasy through which the author blatantly condemns the United States for turning its back on the hunger problem in underdeveloped, overpopulated countries of the world. Surrealistic paintings reiterate and extend the author's social statement through extreme exaggeration and anti-realness.

Heide, Florence Parry. The Shrinking of Treehorn. Illustrated by Edward Gorey. New York: Holiday House, 1971.
This picture book is a tongue-in-cheek commentary exposing the insensitivities of adults to the day-to-day crucial concerns of children. Parents, school teachers, and school administrators are chastised for being so caught up in their own concerns that they actually ignore the children with whom they are interacting. The pen and ink representational drawings reveal the sarcasm and platitudes of this fantasy.

Jackson, Jacqueline and William Perlmutter. The Endless Pavement. Illustrated by Richard Cuffari. New York; The Seabury Press, 1973.
This picture book is a speculative fiction exposing possible imminent consequences of our over industrialized, mechanized society. It is a futuristic fantasy through which the authors criticize our current trend toward abolishing all human touch and affection. The stark black and white expressionistic drawings hint at optimism through the addition of the symbolic red apple.

Raskin, Ellen. The World's Greatest Freak Show. New York: Atheneum, 1971.
In this picture book, the author uses the theme of comeuppance to comment on the results from the insensitive human traits of conceit, name-calling, egocentricism, vanity, greed, and exploitation. The fantasy berates man's inhumanity to man through the intensity of verbal and visual exaggeration. Brightly colored overlays are incorporated with a cartoon black line style to reveal bitterly cruel happenings.

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Selection Under Consideration

_____

_____

Some Associational Characteristics of Satire:

_____humorous _____example page_____

(amusing, whimsical, funny)

_____stereotyping _____example page_____

(oversimplified, standardization, conformity, caricature)

_____sarcasm _____example page_____

(caustic language, cutting remark)

_____ridicule _____example page_____

(make fun of, name-calling, make a fool of)

_____social criticism _____example page_____

(judgment of an issue, unfavorable attack of a societal ill)

_____verbal humor _____example page_____

(word humor, puns, name-calling, platitudes)

_____superiority _____example page_____

(pretension, out-do, better than)

_____moralizing _____example page_____

(teaching, message, explaining)

_____distortion _____example page_____

(pervert, deform, twist, falsified reproduction)

_____condemnation _____example page_____

(blame, declare wrong, accuse, reproach)

_____scorn _____example page_____

(disgust, anger)

_____exaggeration _____example page_____

(overstatement, increase to misrepresent)

_____contempt _____example page_____

(despise, point a finger at)

_____derision _____example page_____

(mockery, putting down)

_____a work of humor

_____a work of satire

_____ _____

signature date

* synonyms appear in ( )

The Design

The basic design for this descriptive study was a survey which involved the use of initial interview sessions, personal observation on the part of the researcher, and administration of a series of the same questionnaire to each subject.

Groups of four students each were randomly selected from three fourth grade classrooms (Schools A, C, and E) and three seventh grade classrooms (Schools B, D, and F). Each group included two female children and two male children. Although the procedure was identical during each session, the sequence of literary selections offered to the groups (the treatment) was varied so that the groups of students were exposed to the literary selections in differing orders. The intent was to avoid any rank ordering of the literary selections on the part of the researcher and to provide an opportunity for any growth of response during the treatment time to reveal itself.

Initially, each group of four was interviewed to obtain the necessary biographical information required by the researcher. Then, each group heard the literary selections read aloud to them as a group, followed by an administration of a questionnaire to each subject at each session. At the end of the treatment, each subject was given a set of oral preference/rejection questions pertaining to all of the literary selections in the treatment procedure.

The Instrument

Development of The Instrument used for this descriptive study consisted of three phases. The categories included in The Instrument I constructed during Phase I were based on information gleaned by this researcher as she read the professional literature and related research about responses to literature and humorous literature in particular. Phase II consisted of the limited pilot study which was conducted to establish the feasibility of The Instrument developed during Phase I. Phase III of developing The Instrument consisted of determining the degree of inter-rater agreement of The Instrument to be used in the descriptive part of the study.

When considering sixty-eight possible scored responses of the four works, this researcher found agreement to exist for sixty-one of the scorings or eighty-nine percent total agreement between her scorings of the subject's responses and the scorings of the four raters.

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Name_____ Date_____

Book 1 2 3 4 5 Group Order I II III

1. Have you ever read this story before? Y N

2. Have you ever read any other books like this one before either in a group or alone? Y N

2a. If yes, can you remember the names of them or what they were about? Titles/Descriptions

_____

_____

3. Did you like the story? Y N

3a. If yes, what did you like about the story?

3b. If no, what did you dislike about the story?

4. Do you think that the story is funny? Y N

4a. If yes, what are some of the funny parts that you can remember?

4b. Why do you think those parts are funny?

5. Are there any other funny parts? Y N

5a. What are they?

5b. Why do you think that those parts are funny?

6. Who do you think are the funny characters in the story?

6a. What funny things did they/s/he say?

7. What do you think that this story is making fun of?

8. What or who do you think that this story is criticizing?

9. What are the funny words or names or sentences or expressions in this story?

10. Did any of the characters think that they were better than another character? Y N

10a. If yes, which ones?

11. What do you think that the author is trying to teach us about?

12. Does the author misrepresent anything or include anything which is not really true? Y N

12a. If yes, what?

13. Who does the author blame in this story?

14. What kinds of things do you think make the author angry?

15. What was it about this book that you really liked?

Pertinent Verbal/Nonverbal Responses:

Response Order 1 2 3 4

16. Would you read this story again? Y N

17. Does the author exaggerate anything in the story? Y N

17a. If yes, what does s/he exaggerate?

18. At what or who is the author pointing her/his finger?

19. Is the author mocking anything or putting anyone down? Y N

19a. If yes, who or what?

20. Have you ever read any other books by this author? Y N

20a. If yes, can you remember the names of them or what they were about? Titles/Descriptions

_____

_____

21. Would you read any more books by this author at another time? Y N

22. Did anything about the story make you feel uncomfortable? Y N

22a. If yes, what made you feel uncomfortable?

HUMOROUS RESPONSES

EXAMPLES

_____humorous
_____stereotyping
_____sarcasm
_____ridicule
_____social criticism
_____verbal humor
_____superiority
_____moralizing
_____distortion
_____condemnation
_____scorn
_____exaggeration
_____contempt
_____derision

OTHER RESPONSES

_____literal
_____critical
_____to artwork
_____to physical humor
_____by association
_____themes enumerated
_____to ending
_____laughter
_____enjoyment

Preference/Rejection Questions

1. Of all the books that we have read together, which one did you like the most?

2. Why?

3. Of all the books that we have read together, which one did you think was funniest?

4. Why?

5. Of all the books that we have read together, which one did you like the least?

6. Why?

7. Of all the books that we have read together, which one was the least funny?

8. Why?

9. Is there any book that you like as much as another?

10. Why?

11. Of all the characters in these books, which ones were funny?

12. What funny things did they say or do?

Conclusions

This researcher arrived at the following conclusions:

1. This investigator was able to determine, from the verbal responses of these students, that virtually all of them express an enjoyment of satirical literature as a type of humorous literature.

2. An analysis of the students' responses to the selections of satire indicate that they apparently do not respond to the major themes within the selections and do not associate them with their own lives.

3. An analysis of the students' responses to the selections of satire reveals that fourth and seventh grade students are capable of responding in a critical rather than merely a literal manner and that they significantly glean information for their responses from aspects revealed within the artwork in these picture books.

4. This researcher was able to determine that these students make overt responses which reflect comprehension of aspects of physical humor and verbal humor within literary selections.

5. An analysis of the students' responses to the selections of satire indicate that they are capable of recognizing the associational characteristics of stereotyping, superiority, moralizing, distortion, scorn, and exaggeration.

6. An analysis of the students' responses to the selections of satire indicate that they apparently do not comprehend the associational characteristics of sarcasm, ridicule, social criticism, condemnation, contempt, or derision.

7. The responses of female students more often than the responses of male students evidenced critical understanding, a response to satire as humorous literature, and recognition of the devices of stereotyping, sarcasm, ridicule, social criticism, condemnation, scorn, contempt, and derision, while the responses of male students more often than the responses of female students evidenced recognition of exaggeration.

8. The responses of seventh grade students more often than the responses of fourth grade students evidenced critical understanding, a response to verbal humor, and recognition of the techniques of stereotyping, ridicule, social criticism, superiority, distortion, scorn, exaggeration, and derision, while the responses of fourth grade students more often than the responses of seventh grade students evidenced a response to the physical humor.

9. The responses of students to satire did not appear to be affected by the variables of time or cumulative exposure to the form of satire.